



Advances in offender risk assessment

Research summary

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Question

What progress is being made in the risk assessment of criminal offenders?

Background

The assessment of an offender's risk to re-offend is one of the most important tasks faced by those who work in a correctional environment. On a daily basis, prison staff, probation and parole officers and parole board members are required to make decisions that impact on the safety of the public, institutional security and the offender's liberty. These decisions require reliable and accurate assessments of the offender's risk to commit another crime.

Most assessments of offender risk in Canada use an actuarial approach. Actuarial prediction measures the characteristics of the offenders and his/her situation that research shows are predictive of criminal behaviour. Each of these factors are then assigned a numerical weight and combined into a risk scale that yields a total score. For example, criminal history, employment and substance abuse are factors predictive of future crime. For each we may assign a score of 1 if the risk factor is present and 0 if it is absent (e.g., a score of 1 for the presence of a criminal history and 0 if there is no history, 1 if unemployed and 0 if employed, etc.). The scores from this three-item scale can then be combined to give a total score ranging from 0 to 3. Further research would then result in a table that shows the chances of recidivism as a function of the total score. For example, a score of 0 may indicate a 5% chance of committing a new offence and a score of 3 would indicate a 70% chance of recidivism.

Actuarial offender risk instruments are widely used. However, there are different types of actuarial risk assessment instruments with some having more benefits than others.

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Method

A review of offender risk assessment was conducted with a specific focus on how these assessments have changed over the years. The different approaches to risk assessment are described as following a generational path beginning with the most basic form of assessment (first generation risk assessment) and ending with the latest form of risk assessment (fourth generation).

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Answer

First generation risk assessment is non-actuarial. It involves the assessment of risk based solely on professional judgement. Although this type of assessment is still used in some jurisdictions, it

has largely been replaced by actuarial risk assessments (second to fourth generation risk assessment) because first generation risk assessment is not as reliable and accurate as the actuarial approaches.

Second generation risk instruments show reasonable predictive accuracy but they consist mainly of *static* risk factors (e.g., age, criminal history). Although they are good predictors, these measurements provide limited information as to what needs to be done to reduce offender risk. Once an offender has a static risk factor it is always a risk factor.

Third generation risk instruments, often referred to as risk-needs instruments, have static and *dynamic* risk factors. Dynamic risk factors or criminogenic needs can change. The presence of a dynamic risk factor directs us to what should be treated to reduce the offender's risk. For example, if an offender is unemployed (dynamic risk factor) then there should be efforts made to help the offender find a job.

Going beyond the third generation risk-need assessments are fourth generation assessments that are just beginning to make their way into practice. Fourth generation instruments not only include risk-need assessment but also integrate the assessment with a case management plan.

Policy implications

1. With the development of second, third and fourth generation instruments there is little justification for the continued use of professional judgement to make decisions related to risk.
2. Any correctional agency that has the goal to reduce recidivism should use, at a minimum, third generation risk-needs assessment instruments.
3. The efficient and effective allocation of resources in the case management of offenders may benefit from the use of the recent fourth generation assessment instruments that integrate case planning with risk-needs assessment.

Source

- Bonta, J., & Wormith, S. J. (2008). Risk and need assessment. In G. McIvor & P. Raynor (Eds.), *Developments in social work with offenders*. (pp. 131-152). London, England: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

For further information

James Bonta, Ph.D.
Corrections Research
Public Safety Canada
340 Laurier Avenue West
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P8
Phone: 613-991-2831
Fax: 613-990-8295
E-mail: jim.bonta@ps.gc.ca

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